



Christianity and the Politicization of the Gospel — Power of Change

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Several weeks ago I read an interesting essay in the [Atlantic Monthly](#) entitled [Crises of Faith](#) by Ross Douthat. The article peaked my interest for several reasons, namely it discussed two very interesting trends associated with American and European religious perspectives. Most people know that Europe has trended highly secular over the last century with large cathedrals echoing times long past. Most people also know that America is a highly religious country with belief in God regularly polling in the 80-90th percentiles. What was interesting about this article was that it was commenting on very recent trends that America is becoming more secular and Europe is seeing a religious resurgence. Now both trends are very small, some may say insignificant, but the sociological movements are real and observable.

Unbelief in America

The trend in America which is highlighted follows the work of two Berkeley sociologists and their paper in the *American Sociological Review*. In this work Michael Hout and Claude Fischer noted that the percentage of Americans who state no religious preference had doubled in less than 10 years.¹ The percentage had gone from 7% to 14% in the 1990s. The reason given is interesting and I will revisit it shortly. I will quote the article at length:

This unexpected spike wasn't the result of growing atheism, Hout and Fischer argued; rather, more Americans were distancing themselves from organized religion as "a symbolic statement" against the religious right. If the association of religiosity with political conservatism continued to gain strength, the sociologists suggested, "then liberal alienation from organized religion [might] become, as it has in many other nations, institutionalized"²

In other words, people's current and deeply held political convictions actually sway people from religious involvement as they see it a front for the other side of the aisle. Christian leaders, give ear to this. Among the younger generation this seems to be more acute with the percentage of irreligious found to be 20% by a recent pew research center survey.³

A Religious? European Vacation

The article goes on to say that things are moving in Europe as well, yet perhaps a slight drift towards religion. Douthat mentions the rise of Islamic immigrants who are not assimilating into secular European values and culture. Additionally, Christian faith is reasserting with Pope Benedict focusing on the re-Christianization of Europe and immigrants from Latin America and Africa giving life to pentecostal and evangelical churches.⁴ The higher birth rates of Muslims and Christians are sure to influence the future of the continent in some way. Finally, Philip

Jenkins [has written recently](#) on the resurgence of Christian faith in Europe in Foreign Policy magazine focusing on both the Catholic and Protestant flavors of the faith.

Overly Politicized Christianity Shrouds the Gospel of Jesus Christ

The Christian faith has long been entangled in political struggles and maneuvering. From the time of Jesus himself to our very day, leaders in movements of Christian faith have affected political views or have been viewed as a threat from political leaders. Rome was threatened by messianic uprisings in Jerusalem, this perhaps even part of the human equation in the crucifixion of Jesus. Certainly the church/state union which was birthed under the emperor Constantine in the 4th century had repercussions, both good and bad, throughout the last sixteen hundred years. I for one am of the opinion that the Christian worldview should inform issues in the public sphere. Our faith and philosophy should weigh into decisions related to the common good of society. Personally, I subscribe to a view of law much akin to that of the medieval philosopher Thomas Aquinas some of which I describe [a bit here](#).

Yet there is a difference between Christian vision shaping our view of the public square and Christian leaders aligning with a certain political party as *the* Christian way. One thing that stood out in this article is the nature of reaction to what is perceived as political visions shrouded in religious clothing. If the research is accurate, people have reacted against religious faith because of particular political impressions given by certain groups, in this case the perceived religious right. I am deeply troubled that perhaps our political stances would keep people away from even a hearing of the gospel.

It is well known that a good percentage of evangelicals have been recently on the Republican side of the aisle. Whether or not you swing that way personally, I want all of us to see that such one party alignment is not good for the church. The gospel transcends political parties and is very much for leftists, right wingers and libertarians alike. There is much to say about the conservative right and some of its stances related to Christian ethics. Certain views on the sanctity of human life (abortion, bioethical issues, etc.) are typically found in the Republican camp today, though not the domain of one party. Yet are there not concerns of the gospel (the poor, the environment, justice) which are as deeply biblical as the sanctity of life and found more on the left? My issue today is not whether or not a Christian can or should vote for party or candidate x, y or z. My issue is with the cultural implications of perceived captivity of Christians to a certain political view. When Christian leaders and pastors hold forth a political view rather than the gospel, the results can be that people feel excluded rather than invited to Jesus. Before they hear from us, they already think we are their cultural adversary in a war of ideas.

I think the church must see space for all manner of political viewpoints and must not politicize her message in the world. I am not saying we should endorse sin, vote for candidates against conscience, etc. Of course the Christian worldview should affect the way someone sees issues and votes. But what I am saying is that we should not declare political war against half of the population to which we hope to present the hope of the gospel.

We ought to put no stumbling block before others and preach Christ and him crucified. Our salvation comes neither through the supreme court nor through the election of the right president. It is a gift of grace purchased by Jesus Christ on a cross of execution. If we forget this our mission may suffer - not out of persecution for righteousness sake, but the result of misguided worldly strategies. Such would be what the Scripture would call folly, the trusting in the princes of men.